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SINGING OR MUSIC: A SUGGESTION

By CONSTANTIN VON STERNBERG

SONG and singing have always been an inexhaustible source of inspiration to the poets and rimesters of every land. They have extolled in the most glowing terms the beauty of the human singing voice; Oliver Wendell Holmes went even so far as to express outright pity for "those that never sing, but die with all the music in them." Surely no true humanitarian will disagree either with him or with the innumerable other poets, but to make our agreement perfect it might be well to know just what kind of singing the poets had in mind when they wrote their pæans about it. That they thought of Grand Opera is improbable and historically impossible because the praises of song in many cases antedate the existence of Grand Opera. Much more likely they referred to the natural, unschooled voice that bursts forth into song for sheer joy of living, over some happy event or the like, and learns its songs by purely oral tradition. They may have thought of church choirs and congregational singing, possibly also of the song of conviviality men sing together at the club table or even of the singing with which working people enliven their labor. With all these types of singing and many others, besides, no one but an ill-willed misanthrope will find any fault, but the singing that inspired the poets is not of the kind which is here to be contrasted to music; what is here referred to is the ubiquitous, pseudo-artistic and utterly unnatural singing of the majority of our vocal amateurs and dilettantes; the singing that drives peaceful neighbors to despair and causes them to move away from their accustomed localities into others where, in all probability, they will be just as much distressed and by the same cause; it is the now epidemical, artificial kind of singing in which so many of our young people indulge—especially the girls, God bless 'em—that is here to be dealt with. The dear girls "take vocal"—as they usually put it—not from any inner urging to "breathe out their soul in song" but rather from a tendency to appear musical without taking the slightest pains to know anything about music. Thus their endeavor, to win applause for worse than nothing and to win it from their musically ignorant

auditors, indicates rather plainly the source of their singing to be vainglorious ambition, not artistic aspiration.

It is this kind of unmusical singing that recently induced several of our musical periodicals to sound a warning of an over-production of singers, while our orchestras are still largely depending upon Europe for their musicians. A desire for mere balance in this matter can scarcely have induced this serious warning. Beneath it there was, no doubt, a much deeper thought; a thought born of the observation in history that preponderance of vocal art never conduced to the development, advancement and educational utility of music in any nation, while the instrumental musicians—more especially those that used keyed instruments—have been the *makers of musical history*.

The explanation of this fact lies in two circumstances: first, that the almost total absence of sensuous charm of keyed instruments has in their devotees favored a less material, more abstract, and therefore more ideal conception of music; inversely, it may have been this higher conception of music and the possibility of producing it in a complete manner that induced their choosing of a keyed instrument; secondly, that there are certain aspects of singing which differentiate it so strongly from music as to justify the view that singing is a phenomenon entirely distinct from music; something that may serve music, as mural painting and decorative sculpture embellish architecture, but that it may also be a totally separate instrumentality for the production of impressions exclusively sensuous and devoid of any meaning.

Bold as such an assertion may look, it is well supported by the "charm of material" of which Herbert Spencer spoke. It is undeniable that, *e. g.*, a wall-paper without any design but of a nice hue gratifies the eye; in a semi-conscious way we are pleased with it, but—we do not call it a "picture"! In precisely the same manner our ear is flattered by the sound of a good human voice; but whether our pleasure is purely sensuous or "musical," that will depend upon a variety of factors. Though, more than any other instrument, the human voice is capable of making a direct appeal to our feelings, it should not be overlooked that it is not an exclusively musical instrument inasmuch as it is (or should be) quite as much concerned with the poetic text and meaning of a song as with the notes of its musical setting. Which one of the two factors is the more weighty in singing, is a question somewhat beside this discussion, but a passing mention may be made of it that either of the two has often saved the other from well-deserved censure and oblivion. The utterly puerile tune of

“Home, sweet home” owes its stability entirely to the sentiment of the text, while, on the other hand, the text of Schubert’s “Wanderer” is kept alive solely by its wonderful musical setting. To the vocalist, however, the text and the music should be equiponderant factors, for, whenever he does not regard them so and treats the text negligently, he will at the same time cause something else to suffer; something which is of far greater importance than a, possibly, indifferent poem, namely: *the phrasing of the music*, the very element which constitutes the mental handle for the average auditor to grasp the musical sense of a composition. Whenever this handle is broken or so crippled that the auditor hesitates to take hold of it he becomes indifferent to the composition, as a piece of music, and gives himself over to an exclusively sensuous enjoyment instead of feeling this enjoyment incidentally, as a contributing part of a higher, more complex and much deeper reaching delight. It requires no explanation that in the former cases, which are unfortunately very frequent, singing becomes an esthetically lowering, retarding, if not altogether an obstructive, influence in the musical development of a nation.

Many an audience sits patiently through a well written but poorly sung ballad; but when at the end of it the singer fires out that high note (for the sake of which he selected the song)—the applause is deafening! What can have so suddenly roused the enthusiasm of the audience? It was neither the composition nor the text, for neither one nor the other was understood. Was it the athletic feat of reaching the high note without bursting a blood-vessel or a button? Perhaps partly, but in the main it was *the tone of a beautiful instrument*. Not *what* was played upon it, not *how* it was played; not that for which the voice was to be the vehicle; it was, so to speak, a piece of fine cloth which the audience took for a well-made garment. The modesty of this demand on the part of an auditor speaks well enough for his kindness, but as long as he wishes for nothing more he must not cozen himself with the idea that he is an appreciator or an intelligent absorber of *music*, which is a totally different matter.

Taking vocalism by and large, its effect upon the musical development of a nation is easily measured by a geographical survey of music. In Italy vocal music predominates. Some serious musicians like Sgambati, Martucci, Bossi and others have tried to bring their people to a proper appreciation of *music*, as distinct from *voice charm*, but the Symphony is still the pabulum of the not very numerous minority, the higher, cultured classes;

it is not a popularly appreciated type of music there, as it begins to be here.

It is somewhat better in France, though the difference diminishes with every mile when we leave Paris for the interior. Looking at the history of French music and admitting—to avoid digression—that the works of the Neo-French school were more than speculative and experimental, it remains nevertheless true that the finest flower ever grown in the garden of French music was the “Opéra comique” of Grétry, Méhul, Boieldieu, Adam and Auber. The symphonists, Berlioz, Franck and others, were never as popular in France as the Russian and German symphonists are with their respective people. The French feel respect rather than love for instrumental music; they crave the sensuous charm of the human voice; tremolo and all.

To speak of English music in this connection would be premature, because the creative efforts of serious aspect are of too recent a date and too small in number to admit of any prediction as to their longevity and their consequent national influence. In the executive field we find vocal art predominating: opera, oratorio, ballad concert, chorus.

These conditions could not bear comparison with those in Russia and Germany; with those countries where the folk-songs are greatest both in number and in quality and where the people's love of music does, nevertheless, not lean altogether toward the vocal side. The Russians, in their pleasure resorts, have legitimate, complete orchestras, varying in merit but never falling below the artistic line. Even the poor peasants have evolved an instrumental type of music—on the Balalaika—which indicates a craving for more than voice charm. The Germans, in their beer gardens, listen also to full orchestras or to very fine brass bands playing the best class of music and playing it very well, indeed. If we now compare these “instrumental” countries with the “vocal” ones, we find that the instrumental countries have been the chief developers and contributors to the advancement of music as an art, while the vocal countries could not substantiate such a claim. True, Italy gave us a *Verdi* whose genius is indisputable; but his contributions to the *advancement* of music did not begin until his “Manzoni Requiem” and “Aïda,” both of which were strongly and directly influenced by Wagner, whom he so generously admired and of whom he is reported to have said: “he makes me feel so small.”

Russia, on the other hand, has in a remarkably short time given us some truly great symphonic works as well as some

operas of strong musical and dramatic power. As for Germany, it gave the world a complete musical history, an unbroken line of musical giants, from Bach and Händel to Wagner and Brahms, who did not confine themselves to instrumental music but have also written many works of undying beauty for the voice. The song of Schubert is very little short of an art-miracle, but he also gave us the Symphony in C and the immortal "Unfinished," not to speak of his compositions for the piano and of his chamber music. The same impartiality as to vocal and instrumental music has been shown by all the Russian and German masters, while the French and Italian masters favored vocal music almost exclusively. It seems but reasonable to infer from this parallel that the instrumental countries, while by no means neglecting the vocal side, have not only developed the art of music, but they have at the same time educated their people *musically*, while the vocal countries have only followed in the wake of these advancements, catered to the sensuous craving of their people for voice charm and failed to elevate their taste in a more strictly musical sense.

As for ourselves, in our tea-rooms, hotels and kindred places we listen—if we do—to *singers* if, indeed, not to mandolins or other hodge-podge "Salon" orchestras. It is very fortunate that our legitimate Symphony orchestras grow so quickly in number and merit, but their fruition will not show until the audiences attracted to their concerts by the vocal soloists are no larger than those that like any other soloist equally well or, best of all, those that assemble solely for the sake of the orchestra and its program. Until we have reached this point we can, despite our eminent composers, not hope to take rank among the truly musical nations.

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I read once an essay entitled "Against Smoking" which began: "As my right hand takes up the pen, the fingers of my left hold an exquisitely fragrant Havana cigar" and it went on to speak of the abuses of smoking, maintaining that even smoking, though a vice, can be made genteel by a certain amount of self-restraint, discretion and decorum. My position resembles that of the essayist precisely: as the right side of my heart rebels against the inordinate preponderance of vocalism in our country, its left side cherishes the greatest love and the most enthusiastic admiration for those superb singers who lend their great artistry to the service of high, dignified musical thought and sentiment. When these fine women and men sing, however, they participate

in *music making*. They, all, deserve the praise that an old viola player of the orchestra once gave to Jenny Lind when he said: "You? You are no prima donna! We, down there in the orchestra, regard you as a member of the orchestra on the stage!" It is said that Jenny Lind embraced the old gentleman and regarded his praise as the highest that could be given to a singer. I feel certain that among our "orchestra members on the stage" there will be very few, if any, that would not share the views here expressed about singing. Only a poor, pervertedly minded musician can fail to recognize in the human voice, despite its relatively small compass, the noblest of all musical instruments; but for this very reason must the sane, earnest musician protest against its use as a means for mere self-exploitation and its consequent lowering of musical standards.

It is no longer open to doubt that there is a decided overproduction of singers in this country, especially of mediocre and downright bad, unmusical ones. It is due, principally, to the large number of alleged vocal teachers who know no more about music than a cow does of botany, although, like her, they live on the products of a field not their own. The contention that they should be good physiologists rather than good musicians is fallacious, because physiology—rudimentary at least—enters into every kind of physical training, from athletics to the playing of a musical instrument; it is by no means reserved for vocal training alone. Teachers of instrumental music, however, besides knowing something of anatomy and physiology, must be *musicians*; why should not vocal teachers be likewise? Richard Wagner said: "The dignity of the interpretative artist depends upon his respect for creative art; if he trifles with it he throws away his honor." Vocal teachers should insist upon it that their pupils should study *music* in conjunction with some legitimate instrument and they should reject such pupils as are unwilling to do so. This would be one way—the shortest by far—to make singing and music-making identical, as it should be and as, relatively speaking, it now so seldom is.